

Benjamin Shepard



Fight Back Bank of America March, March 15, 2012
Photo: Stacy Lanyon

So many of the movements I care about have targeted Wall Street as the source of income inequality, disparities in health, etc. When ACT UP targeted Wall Street in its first actions a quarter century ago, they argued Wall Street still controls our healthcare. When *Reclaim the Streets* organized its June 18th, 1999 action in coordination with the *Ascendant Global Justice Movement*, their action was to take place in Zuccotti Park. I remember the police sweeping up from the street the second we stepped out of the park, so when I heard about plans to occupy Wall Street last summer, I could not imagine it would work, but with a little luck and tenacity, as well as intelligence, they were able to stay. In my wildest dreams I could not have imagined a two month occupation would follow, accompanied for another four months by sit-ins, gestures of direct action, sleep-ins, pickets, and models of alternative community building.

When I first started coming down, I was immediately struck by how kind everyone seemed and by how much mutual aid was taking place in the space. What has kept me coming is the willingness of OWS to build relationships with local groups and campaigns, bringing its broad base to groups struggling for workers, against foreclosures, and campaigns to stop the criminalization of poverty. Most importantly, the movement grounded itself in public space. The majority of my activism over the last two decades has involved struggles over public space.

The movement is targeting social and economic inequality and all its manifestations, yet instead of using boring pie charts like we read in grad school, people are using their bodies. We're using direct action, play, public interaction, theater, reimagining public space. This income inequality is our single largest issue today. It is at the root of countless problems. We will never get out of this economic crisis if regular people depend on so little just to survive. Over and over again our system prioritizes profits over people, but it does not have to be this way. We can live in a more caring world, one where we have a few more safeguards for health, for education, for services, for new kinds of social relations to take hold.

Through sleep outs, mutual aid, street theater, arts, creative direct action and play, OWS has already made this city a more engaging and caring place. This is a space with reciprocity and care. On April 26th, a cohort of OWS people joined ACT UP's 25th anniversary of their first zap on Wall Street, an anniversary of an action which took place before some were born. OWS continues a long tradition of direct action stretching back decades. The movement acknowledges this and supports those who came before, while building on and reinventing their legacy. It is also doing its share to make this a better city for all of us in the current moment. The world is already a different place because of the community of resistance, care, and, dare I say, fun created one action at a time.

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